

From Archaeopolis to Onoguris: Excavations in the heart of Lazika

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Abstract

The ruins in the small village of Nokalakevi in Samegrelo, west Georgia, have attracted scholarly interest since the first half of the 19th century. They were first excavated in 1930, confirming their identification as the remains of the fortress of Archaeopolis mentioned in early Byzantine historical sources, and known as Tsikhegoji or ‘the triple-walled fortress’ by Georgian chroniclers. Archaeological evidence demonstrates more or less continual occupation of Nokalakevi from the 8th to the 1st centuries BC, and the renewed military importance of the site in the early Byzantine period, contemporary with the fortifications recently revealed outside the village of Khuntsi, 18km to the east.

Introduction

Approximately 50km east of the Black Sea coast of Georgia, the evocative remains of an early Byzantine period fortress dominate the village of Nokalakevi (Figures 1 and 2). Situated in Samegrelo, 15km from the modern municipal centre of Senaki, the multi-period site at Nokalakevi was an important administrative and military hub in Colchis, and its successor states, from the 8th century BC to the 8th century AD.

Underlying the surviving Byzantine-period structures is evidence of several earlier phases of occupation and abandonment from the 8th to 1st centuries BC, which includes a substantial Hellenistic period (4th to 1st centuries BC) settlement and necropolis. Current evidence from OSL dating of ceramics indicates a prehistoric origin for settlement at the site, which is hardly surprising given the wealth of resources and easily-defendable character of the topography. Whatever the early origins of settlement at Nokalakevi, by the 8th/7th century BC there was clearly a significant population engaged in complex ritual activity unique to the region. Double-headed zoomorphic figurines (Figure 3) dating to this period have only been found at Nokalakevi and at Vani, 40km to the southeast in Imereti. These finds indicate a unified socio-cultural system that spanned the Colchian plain. The settlement appears to have become more substantial in the Early

Antique period (6th/5th centuries BC), continuing to grow in the Hellenistic period, before the Laz kings and their Byzantine allies built the mighty fortifications at Nokalakevi that can still be seen today.

At the peak of its importance the site, known to the Byzantines as Archaeopolis, was the capital of the Kingdom of Lazika. Semi-mythical accounts attribute the earliest fortification of the site to the Hellenistic-period, West Georgian ruler Kuji, from whom the site derives the Georgian name, Tsikhegoji (“the fortress of Kuji”). However, the earliest surviving fortifications at Nokalakevi date to the 4th century AD. They were strengthened in the 5th century, and significant additional fortifications were added in the 6th century AD, including a remodelling of defensive works around the eastern gate. The early Byzantine defensive fortifications of Nokalakevi-Archaeopolis are augmented by its topographic position next to the river Tekhuri, which, to the west of the fortress, has carved a gorge through the limestone geology (Figure 4). Furthermore, the steep and rugged terrain to the north of the site made the citadel that was situated there largely unassailable. A wall connected this ‘upper town’ to the ‘lower’ town below, meaning that a total area of approximately 18ha is contained within the fortifications. Occupation appears to have been focussed in the lower town, however, on relatively level ground between the steep slope of the Unagira ridge and the gorge of the Tekhuri.

Nokalakevi-Archaeopolis commanded an important crossing point of the river Tekhuri, at the junction with a valuable strategic route that still winds through the neighbouring hills to Chkhorotsqu in central Samegrelo. It also played a pivotal part in the major wars fought between the Byzantines and Sasanians in the South Caucasus during the sixth century AD. It was one of the key fortresses guarding Lazika (modern west Georgia) from Sasanian Persian and Iberian (East Georgian/ Kartlian) attack, and was part of a complex chain of forts and towers established along the northeastern frontier of the Byzantine Empire.¹ During the war of AD 540-562, the Persians’ failure to take Nokalakevi-Archaeopolis from the Byzantines and their Laz allies eventually cost them control of Lazika.

¹ Murgulia 2013; Colvin *et al* 2014

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The Swiss philologist Dubois de Montpéroux was the first to associate the walls of Nokalakevi with the Byzantine period fortress of Archaeopolis² – though he also erroneously concluded that it had been built on the ruins of the Colchian city of Aea – and his sketch of the Forty Martyrs' Church, surrounded by the decaying walls of the lower town, is the earliest known image of the site (Figure 5). Dubois de Montpéroux's account drew a number of western travellers to Nokalakevi,³ however it would be almost a century before it was investigated by archaeologists.

Archaeological Investigations

The first archaeological excavations in Nokalakevi took place from the end of November 1930 to the end of January 1931, and were a collaboration between Weimar German and Soviet Georgian specialists, being funded by the Emergency Association of German Science (Der Notgemeinschaft der Deutschen Wissenschaft) in collaboration with the National Education Commission for the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic and the Museum of Georgia in Tbilisi.⁴ The plans for the test pits and other investigations were conceived by Joseph Sauer of the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut following his visit to the region in 1929. Sauer's friendship with Friedrich Schmidt-Ott of the Notgemeinschaft proved exceptionally useful and funding was provided for Sauer's student, Alfons Maria Schneider, to undertake the work⁵ with the support of Georgian specialists Levan Muskhelishvili and Giorgi Gozalishvili. Gozalishvili⁶ noted that Giorgi Chubinashvili and Shalva Nutsbidze had presented an exhibition in Germany at the beginning of November 1930, and accompanied Schneider to Georgia on their return. Schneider and Gozalishvili arrived in Senaki on the 24th November, where they met local authorities before moving on to Nokalakevi. After six weeks' of excavation, excluding days lost to winter weather⁷, the excavation was concluded by 27th January 1931 when they gave a presentation to local authorities in Senaki, before leaving for Zugdidi the following day. Writing in the only publication of results to be produced at the time, Schneider erroneously concluded from the, rather slim, archaeological data that

² Dubois de Montpéroux 1839

³ See, for example, Serena 2015; Telfer 1876

⁴ Kirchhoff 2003, 338

⁵ Arnold 1999

⁶ 1981, 243-248

⁷ Muskhelishvili 1987, 292

There is no evidence available at all that the place was already inhabited in pre-Roman times. The earliest which demonstrably survives is a little settlement on the western slope of the acropolis, which must be ascribed to sometime after the early Roman Iron Age, based on meagre finds of potsherds.⁸

Despite the limitations of the excavation the team did achieve a number of milestones, including the discovery of a hoard of 23 gold coins of the Emperor Maurice (582-602 AD) in one of the towers (Figure 6). Schneider's expedition was also the first to excavate a burial at Nokalakevi, which was found to the north of the Forty Martyrs Church beyond the precinct wall. It contained two small ceramic jugs, two bronze bracelets, five beads of glass-like paste and an irregularly shaped piece of bronze sheet. Schneider dated this burial to the 2nd or 3rd century AD, though the description of the grave goods certainly sound far more typical of those of the Hellenistic period that have been excavated since.

There was no further archaeological excavation at Nokalakevi for a generation, though after the Second World War the standing remains were occasionally the subject of survey work or architectural analysis. The second season of excavation was not until 1968, with a handful of test pits opened by the West Georgian Exploratory Archaeological Expedition, directed by Giorgi Grigolia.⁹ Grigolia's team returned in 1971 and, in the process of excavating further test pits, unearthed a Hellenistic period pot burial with an associated bronze bracelet.¹⁰ This was the first burial to be discovered in a large ceramic vessel, a *pithos*, at Nokalakevi. A second was found in 1974, and six more between 1975 and 1977. Further examples were excavated between 1978 and 1988, however the majority of graves in the vast Hellenistic period necropolis, later dissected by the eastern fortifications, were flexed inhumations. The burial ground was interpreted, according to Gvinchidze,¹¹ as representing three chronological phases:

1. Inhumations containing tightly flexed burials, dating to the end of the 4th to the middle of the 3rd century BC;

⁸ Schneider 1931, 354

⁹ Grigolia *et al* 1973

¹⁰ Grigolia *et al* 1972

¹¹ 1988: 25

2. *Pithos* (large ceramic vessels) graves, dating to the middle of the 3rd to the end of the 2nd century BC;
3. Inhumations containing moderately flexed burials, dating to the end of the 2nd to the end of the 1st century BC;

Twenty further Hellenistic burials were found between 2003 and 2010, and while none were within a *pithos* they did include cremation burials; jar/ *dergi* burials; and amphora burials, none of which had previously been identified in Nokalakevi.

Concerted efforts to study and conserve the site date back to 1973, when the Department of Medieval Archaeology of the S. Janashia Museum of Georgia in Tbilisi established a Nokalakevi Expedition, led by Parmen Zakaraia and Nodar Lomouri. From 1973 until 1990 the annual excavations were well funded by the relevant agencies of the Georgian SSR, which enabled six-month-long field seasons of excavation and conservation. The results of the excavations from 1973 to 1989 were published in three volumes in the 1980s and 90s.¹² Work in 1973 and 1974 was focused on the initial assessment of the archaeological remains, which revealed a large bathhouse along the southern wall of the fortifications and the south end of a large stone-built building, interpreted as a palace.¹³ Excavations revealed that the latter had been constructed around the beginning of the 6th century AD and was converted into a wine-cellar in the 16th-17th centuries. The east gate was investigated and it was also confirmed that the city had not only a 'land' gate but a 'river' gate as well. The former was the arched gateway in the east wall of the city, while the latter was actually a tunnel running down to the river at the western end of the lower town.

In 1975 and 1976 the excavation of the eastern fortifications continued, and this revealed that there were actually three parallel defensive walls.¹⁴ The inner wall was constructed of dressed limestone blocks and was preserved in places to a height of up to 4 metres. This wall was reinforced by square protruding towers, of which two protected the gate house and one situated

¹² Zakaraia 1981; 1987; 1993

¹³ Zakaraia 1981

¹⁴ Zakaraia 1981

halfway up the hill slope protected the lower fortifications from being overtopped. A second wall was subsequently constructed between, and flush with, these protruding towers. Later excavations, in the 1990s and early 2000s, revealed that the first wall has a very substantial foundation; however the second wall lacks any proper foundations, its wide base resting close to the surface and its upper levels tapering. The third wall, of large ashlar blocks, was clearly added last. The excavators dated the first wall to the 4th century AD, the second to the turn of the 4th and 5th centuries, and the third to the end of the 5th or the early 6th century.

At the end of 1974 work was begun on the construction of a building for the management of the Nokalakevi State Farm, which now houses the local museum. This was situated 100 metres to the east of the lower terrace fortifications. An archaeological watching brief on the work recorded a pot burial at the point of convergence of the trenches dug for the foundations of the north and the east walls.¹⁵ Further excavations in this area in the following years, up to 1977, revealed 24 more graves belonging to an ancient cemetery. Of these, two inhumations date back to the 5th or the middle of the 3rd centuries BC; six pot burials to the middle of the 3rd or to the 2nd century BC.¹⁶

During the 1973-1976 excavations, work was confined to the lower terrace of the fortress, on the area above the Tekhuri river. In 1977, however, the completion of a road to the top of the mountain allowed the expedition to start excavations in the citadel. Work began with the clearing of the towers in the fortification wall of fallen masonry. A number of articles in the first volume of reports from Nokalakevi-Archaeopolis are devoted to publishing the most important archaeological materials recovered between 1973 and 1977.¹⁷ Coin finds from the first few years of excavation belong almost exclusively to the late 5th-early 7th centuries AD (these are Byzantine coins of the Emperors Anastasius to Maurice 491-602AD), however this profile changed over subsequent seasons. Individual coins of Hadrian (117-138), and Constantius Chlorus (293-306) or Constantine the Great (306-337) were found, and Colchian 'tetri' of the 4th century BC now constitutes the bulk of the numismatic material found at Nokalakevi. West Georgian 'kirmaneuli',

¹⁵ Zakaraia 1981

¹⁶ Zakaraia 1981

¹⁷ Abdushelishvili and Tsiuma 1981; Gvinchidze 1981; Kaukhchishvili 1981; Lekvinadze and Khvedelidze 1981

the standard currency in the 13th to 15th centuries, were found, as were examples of Turkish coinage – evidence of the expansion of Ottoman influence into the area.¹⁸ Metalwork found between 1973 and 1977 included a variety of military and domestic artefacts.¹⁹ The most interesting find was a significant portion of a bronze 'choros' (a light hanging introduced in Byzantine domed churches from the 7th century) with a cruciform personal monogram reading 'Evstrat', and another inscription reading 'ΘΕΟΤΟΚΕ' (meaning 'bearer of God', an epithet of the Virgin Mary), which was found in the two-storey palace. Finds of the 8th-7th centuries BC included a variety of precious and semi-precious stones relating to bead-manufacture; evidence of metal-working; and the discovery of a large number of fragmentary, double-headed zoomorphic figurines. Occupation of the site appears to have been particularly intensive during the 6th - 4th centuries BC, with ceramic finds from this period representing a range of typical domestic wares - sherds of pithoi, cooking pots, jugs, bowls, drinking vessels etc. The numerous finds of the 4th - 6th centuries AD, unearthed between 1973 and 1989, included local imitations of Roman and Byzantine red slip ware. Evidence of on-going occupation of the site, though on a smaller scale, was found in the form of two distinct groups of later ceramic: one group with deep dimples and incisions made in the thicker elements (for example the base and handles) before firing; the second group made of white clay, with hard, thin walls and a burnished surface. Some examples were decorated with patterns in red slip. Both groups of late pottery are dated stylistically to the 7th - 11th centuries AD.²⁰

Between 1978 and 1987 work continued both in the upper citadel and on the lower terrace.²¹ The remains of two churches were fully exposed in the central part of the lower town near the Forty Martyrs Church. The first of these was dated to the middle or the second half of the 4th century. It is rectangular in plan, with a semi-circular apse at its east end. It was replaced by a large, three-aisled basilica erected directly over it in the middle of the 5th century. This was in turn destroyed after which another aisled basilica was built to its north. This, the extant Forty Martyrs Church, appears to have undergone several phases of repair and extension during the

¹⁸ Abramishvili 1987, 1993

¹⁹ Zakaraia 1981

²⁰ Lekvinadze 1987

²¹ Zakaraia 1987; 1993

middle ages, finally becoming a domed church.²² Two other new buildings were discovered in the lower terrace during this period. In the south-eastern part of the site, near the fortification walls, the stone foundations were uncovered of a rectangular building, which possibly housed the military commanders of the Byzantine and Laz garrison of the 5th/6th century. The foundations of another building – a small basilica with an apse situated to the west of the Forty Martyrs church – has been interpreted as a baptistery. Work also continued in the upper citadel, including excavations in the multi-phased towers at the northwest and the east end of the fortified area atop the hill. In the southwest corner of the citadel another small gate was discovered, and clearance along the southern citadel wall provided a clearer indication of the manner in which the fortification had been laid out.

In 1990, with Georgian independence from the Soviet Union on the horizon, limited archaeological excavation took place at only three sites. The first was located to the west of the lower town, about 50m north of the tunnel that provided secure access to the Tekhuri. Excavations at this location revealed a square building orientated northwest-southeast, the southwest wall of which was 26.5m long. The walls that run northeast from this survived to a length of 7m, were 1.2m thick and not more than 1.5m in height. The walls define an area of more than 100 cubic metres. The main southwest wall includes two pipes which extend the full width of the wall, and together with hydraulic mortar led to the building being interpreted as a reservoir which supplied water to a 5th/ 6th century AD bathhouse 70m to the south, down a steep slope. Excavation of deposits within the building produced archaeological material from various periods, some of which was present as a result of colluvial movement including Hellenistic pottery, and two sherds of pottery dated to the 9th-11th centuries AD.

In the same year work took place on some of the interior fortifications located in the southeast of the lower town, near the first palace. Surviving walls were conserved to prevent their collapse, and a small excavation associated with this work produced only two small sherds of pot and two sherds of amphorae dated to the 4th-6th centuries AD. Excavations also began to the northeast of the 'bell tower'. As is the case with much of the lower town, particularly at its northern edge where the terrace meets the bottom of the steep slope to the north, there was a great deal of

²² Kapanadze 1987

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mixing of material resulting from colluvial movement. For this reason, fragments of pipe-handled vessels from the 6th-4th centuries BC were found in the same contexts as Hellenistic-period beads and ceramic, and glass and metal wares dating to the Early Byzantine period.

The difficult period that followed Georgian independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 included civil war following a coup d'état (1993), and conflicts in Abkhazia (1992-3) and in South Ossetia (1991-2). The Senaki district of Samegrelo, within which Nokalakevi is located, was one of the epicentres of the civil war and is also located near to Abkhazia. Therefore there was little continuity during the 1990s, with only four seasons of excavation (between 1995 and 1998) undertaken at Nokalakevi in the years immediately following Georgian independence. These were generally small archaeological investigations undertaken by Janashia Museum staff, often unpaid and with little or no institutional support, however by the end of the 1990s initial discussions were already underway between the Janashia Museum and British specialists about establishing a collaborative expedition. Summer 2001 witnessed the first season of the Anglo-Georgian Expedition to Nokalakevi (*kartul-inglisuri ekspeditsia nokalakevshi*), and this collaboration continues today. An edited monograph, reporting the results of the first ten seasons of AGEN's work, was published in 2014²³ and a second, reporting on excavations from 2011 to 2015, is currently in production.

The Anglo-Georgian Expedition to Nokalakevi

The expedition's first trench (Trench A) was opened on the 18th July 2001 and was situated about 5m to the north of the main, eastern, gate - immediately to the west of the 6th century AD steps and their associated foundations. Underneath the modern colluvial sediment, containing very mixed deposits including finds from the Hellenistic period through to the 20th century, large sections of masonry that had fallen from the fortification walls sealing the underlying deposits, testament to the long-term degradation of the standing Byzantine remains once they had ceased to be maintained. Underneath the masonry, deposits relating to various phases of wall construction from the 4th to the 6th centuries AD were revealed, along with associated occupation. Somewhat surprisingly, though perhaps providing evidence of ground clearance at the time of the Laz/ early Byzantine fortification of the site, Hellenistic period (4th - 1st centuries

²³ Everill 2014

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BC) burials were revealed from 2003 onwards, directly underlying the earliest of these deposits. These burials included flexed inhumations with associated jewellery, cremations and inhumations within amphorae and cooking vessels. Evidence suggests that the Hellenistic period was a time of great change at Nokalakevi, with structures dating to that time stratigraphically underlying the burials, though physically very close. This may indicate a shift in the focus of the settlement in those centuries and absolute dating techniques may, in the future, further clarify the temporal relationship between these phases, as further excavations elsewhere at the site shed more light on settlement foci. Early Antique period deposits (6th-4th centuries BC) were revealed from 2010, and the impression from the structural evidence for the 6th-5th/ 4th centuries BC is largely one of continuity into the Hellenistic period. The orientation and alignment of the walls certainly suggests that occupation of the site continued into the Hellenistic period, but more noteworthy is the notion that some of the structures, or at least phases of them, may have overlapped. The presence of a bronze scale of 6th-4th centuries BC armour and Attic pottery in one layer, at a time when the Black Sea coast was being settled by Greek traders, represents an interesting indication of the significant inland trade of Greek goods.

The 8th/7th centuries BC are also well-represented in Nokalakevi, and Trench A provided further evidence for this period. It is interesting to note, in light of the discovery of an early palaeochannel underlying the archaeological deposits, that no structures or graves were found, but that the deposits seemed primarily related to ritual activity – in particular the significant numbers of broken double-headed zoomorphic figurines. Given that this must have been very wet ground for a considerable period after the palaeochannel had filled, with groundwater continuing to move down it as the expedition's own recent experience in Trench A testifies, it seems entirely plausible that this was a rather liminal area in the 8th/7th centuries BC – i.e. marshy ground on the edge of the habitable area higher up the slope. It seems reasonable to suggest that these two aspects are in fact related, and that the Early Iron Age inhabitants of Nokalakevi were deliberately destroying, or sacrificing, the zoomorphic figurines prior to their deposition at the edge of, or in, the marshy ground. This kind of water-/ marsh-edge rituality is well-documented elsewhere (including examples such as the fens of East England, where traditions of ritual deposition emerge by the late Bronze Age and continue for many centuries;²⁴ and the bogs

²⁴ Rogers 2013

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of Northern Europe) and it may well explain the pattern of archaeological evidence observed in the lower deposits in Trench A.

The trench was finally excavated down to natural in summer 2016, with 3.5m of stratified deposits revealing the full extent of human activity in the area. The other trenches excavated by the Anglo-Georgian Expedition since 2001 have added further detail and confirmed the periods during which human activity was greatest. Archaeologically, Trench B was sealed by a number of thick layers representing several episodes of colluvial movement. The upper layers contained a very mixed assortment of finds – plastic and metalwork dating from the second half of the 20th century; 19th century pottery and metalwork; Byzantine pottery and glass and Hellenistic pottery. Photographs of the area around the site, taken in the 1960s and 1970s, show the hillside to the north under low shrub, rather than mature trees like today. Schneider recorded the line of the fortification walls and some of his plans show the cemetery walls still clearly above ground at this point. Putting these facts together suggests that the hillside was cleared of vegetation to allow further investigation and this resulted in a substantial quantity of material from the hill being deposited around the area of Trench B in the last 70 years. If the tree-felling was for the benefit of, or resulting from the work of, the first archaeologist to excavate in Nokalakevi, it is ironic that these actions appear to have ultimately led to the burial of the walls and the creation of a new archaeological record.

Its areas of principal archaeological interest can be summarised as follows:

1. A Christian cemetery first established in the early Byzantine period (about the 5th/6th century AD), revealed in the southwest corner of the trench. This produced 37 burials in excavations from 2002-2005 and 2009-2012, with two further partial burials revealed beyond the crude wall which apparently defines the cemetery enclosure. The intercutting nature of many of the burials, combined with associated 5th/6th century AD material culture in some graves, and the apparent survival of coffin timber in one other appear to suggest that the cemetery was in use from the early Byzantine period through to the 20th century - with the intensity of its use reflecting the periods of growth and decline of the settlement. All but three burials appear to have been laid out in a standard Christian manner, with the three – two adults and

a neonate – being orientated north-south (feet to the south) in a supine position, and may represent a socially liminal family group buried at the northeast corner of the cemetery.

2. A Hellenistic period clay and timber structure and associated deposits located towards the north of the trench. Somewhat surprisingly these remains were sealed by a series of substantial colluvial layers. This underscores the oddity of the apparent absence of layers from the first three centuries AD at the site, and perhaps also indicates that settlement in the early Byzantine period was not as dense as might have been expected. The method of construction can be inferred from the small area of the building exposed, and is consistent with the evidence of analogous buildings revealed from 2006 onwards in Trench A. It involved the laying of an unbonded line of large limestone blocks as a foundation, or sill, onto which was placed a wooden beam or beams. Upright posts measuring approximately 0.1m in diameter, such as the ones found as charcoal, or as impressions in pieces of daub, were fixed to this horizontal beam. A wattle and daub wall was constructed on this framework. There was no archaeological evidence for the roofing material, which is most likely to have been wooden shingles or thatch. To the south of the building a large yard surface, formed of a dense layer of angular limestone pebbles and cobbles, was found.

The cemetery area was excavated down to natural deposits in 2012, with the area north of the cemetery wall excavated from 2003-2005; and then from 2010-2014. Trench B was finally completed towards the start of the 2014 season. This was the first of the recent trenches to expose natural deposits, which, in this part of the lower terrace, consisted of a very firm reddish brown clay. The first archaeological deposit overlying this was colluvial in character, with a substantial quantity of angular limestone cobbles. The material culture retrieved from it included worked flint, the butt end of a polished stone tool with a drilled hole for the haft, and pottery that was OSL-dated to the Bronze Age.

Following the completion of Trench B, Trench C was opened immediately to the west of the current Dig House – first constructed as the Director's house around 1977. Elements of the original Dig House, such as concrete steps and the north wall of the ground floor where it also served as revetment against the slope, survived to the east and north of the trench. This building

was originally constructed as the village hospital towards the end of the 19th century, or early in the 20th century, and appears in photographs taken by Gozalishvili during the 1930-31 expedition. The excavation of Trench C allowed for the first investigation of the western end of the 'lower town' with modern techniques. The results were not dissimilar to those observed in Trench B and are revealing as much for what is absent as what is present. Aside from the fascinating opportunity to excavate the material remains of the expedition's Soviet-period precursor, those upper layers underlying the dig house were colluvial sediments, containing mixed material culture, including OSL dated ceramics from the Hellenistic to perhaps as late as the 12th century AD. As was the case in the north part of Trench B, the first *in situ* ancient remains, observed in 2015, were a wall sill/ base formed of unbonded limestone blocks. Underlying this, with further parallels to Trench B, was a minimum of one metre of colluvial sediments overlying a primary archaeological layer containing ceramic, OSL-dated to the Bronze Age, but no related structural evidence. The trench was completed in the last few days of the 2015 season.

The expedition's fourth area of activity involved archaeological work in and around the Forty Martyrs' Church, following a request from Bishop Shio (Mujiri) of the Senaki and Chkhorotsqu Diocese of the Patriarchate of Georgia for the investigation of certain elements of the site, and the work was undertaken by a small team after the main field season had been completed. The work was funded by the National Agency for Cultural Heritage Preservation of Georgia, and undertaken by members of the Anglo-Georgian Expedition to Nokalakevi utilising the expedition's established excavation and recording methodology. Trench D in fact consisted of two foci (the south nave and the south porch) which were unified into one area of investigation during the excavation. The archaeological work within the church was primarily intended to evaluate the survival of evidence relating to the church's dedication to the Forty Martyrs and revealed a grave in the south porch which had been capped by rows of round *pilae*, presumably reused from the ancient bathhouse. Although the *pilae* had been disturbed by the digging of a small modern pit, perhaps for the purpose of concealing a silver icon frame from the Bolsheviks, it seemed likely that they originally consisted of four rows of ten *pilae* referencing the Forty Martyrs. The porch had been thought to date to the 16th or 17th centuries, however the skeleton was associated with a distinct type of buckle. The closest Georgian analogy was with buckles discovered in Samtavro, which are similar to Avarian types and are dated to the 7th century AD.

The buckle found in Nokalakevi was even more similar to the buckles discovered in the Volga Federal District, in the cemetery of the earlier Bulgarians, and these are dated to between the 8th century and the 10th century AD. Consequently, the burial has been dated broadly to the 7th-10th centuries AD and, while the porch may have been constructed over an earlier tomb, it seems more likely that it was integral to this structure and that the porch itself is far earlier than previously thought.

Trenches E, F and G and still being investigated at the time of writing and it would be premature to summarise the findings from these areas. Suffice to say that the archaeological work being undertaken by the Anglo-Georgian Expedition continues to shed light on human activity at Nokalakevi.

Excavations at Khuntsi

Since 2015 the expedition has also been investigating fortifications near the village of Khuntsi (see Figure 1, above, and Figure 7), in the neighbouring municipality of Martvili, which may well represent the physical remains of the 6th century fortress of Onoguris. Agathias of Myrina or Scholasticus, a 6th century Byzantine historian, provides crucial accounts of the “Great War of Egrisi” during which Sassanid Persian forces attacked Byzantine-held Lazika. In these accounts Agathias²⁵ mentions the fortress of Onoguris on several occasions, describing it as strategically important to both the Byzantines and the Iranians, and noting that it was known as Hagios Stephanos in his day (Stepantsminda in Georgian, Saint Stephen in English). While translating Agathias’ work, Kaukhchishvili²⁶ tried to identify the location of this fortress. He linked its name with the Unagira Mountain that is situated on the border of Martvili and Khoni districts. He also noted Agathias’ account of how, in AD554, Persian forces occupied the Kingdom of Lazika up to the river Tskhenistsqali, known as the Hippis in classical sources, with Byzantine forces maintaining fortified positions to the west of the river.²⁷ Based on this account, Kaukhchishvili felt that the fortress should be on the eastern border of Lazika, approximately halfway between Nokalakevi-Archaeopolis in the west and Kutaisi in the east.

²⁵ *Historiarum Libri Quinque*; Keydell 1967: II.22.3; III.3.8-III.7; IV.9.6; IV.11

²⁶ 1936: 59-62, Note 1

²⁷ Kaukhchishvili 1936: 38-41, Note 2

Kaukhchishvili also identified Onoguris with the fortress of Ukimerion (usually referred to as Uthimereos in western translations), and subsequently several suggestions have been made for the location of Onoguris. Berdzenishvili²⁸ also connected its name with the Unagira Mountain, and searched for it in the vicinity of Bandza and Nokalakevi. He described a temptation to link the village of Onoghia situated near Bandza with Onoguris, however Onoghia is located on the plain with no suitable location for a fortress of such importance. In the 1980s, the Nokalakevi expedition undertook archaeological excavations at Abedati fortress, in Martvili district, and publications²⁹ linked the site with Onoguris. Braund,³⁰ noting the existence of a 6th or 7th century inscription calling on Saint Stephen in the village of Sepieti's basilica, suggested Sepieti as the site of Onoguris.³¹ In recent years this issue was discussed by Pailodze³² who, in studying the work of Agathias and the geographical descriptions, stated that it was impossible to identify Abedati with Onoguris because of the distance from Kutaisi. He also noted that the mountain ridge of Unagira begins at the border with Imereti, near the village of Matkhoji on the opposite bank of the river Tskhenistsqali from the hill of upper Khuntsi, known as "Najikhu". Pailodze reported some standing remains on the hill at Khuntsi which he suggested might be the remains of Onoguris, but he did not excavate. At the same time, the previous association of Abedati with Onoguris was challenged by Lomitashvili who noted that most of the material culture excavated considerably post-dated the 'Great War of Egrisi'.³³

An archaeological evaluation, through the excavation of four test pits, was undertaken at Khuntsi by a small team in 2015. Ceramic from a context in Test Pit 3 was sent to the Research Laboratory for Archaeology and the History of Art at the University of Oxford for analysis, and was dated through Optically Stimulated Luminescence to 646AD (+/- 160). The same context produced an elaborate stamped decoration on the underside of an amphora handle (Figure 8) and although, after some investigation, no other examples of this motif could be found beyond western

²⁸ 1975: 463-465

²⁹ Zakaria and Kapanadze 1991; Lekvinadze 1993

³⁰ 1994, 306

³¹ Braund and Sinclair 2000, 3-4, 9

³² 2003

³³ 2003: 210

Georgia, a single example of a similar decoration was found in the Nokalakevi archive at the S. Janashia Museum of Georgia (Figure 9). This example had been found outside the walls of Nokalakevi itself in 1981, from a layer that had been dated by the imported wares within it to the 5th/ 6th centuries AD.

Investigation of the site was significantly expanded in 2016 and 2017, with five trenches designed to shed further light on the structural remains indicated by the test pits (Figure 10). This archaeological work revealed more information on the size and scale of the fortifications, exposing a 25m length of wall along the northern edge of the crown of the hill (Figure 11). Excavations also produced a further example of the stamped handle decoration, and a large number of fragmentary 5th-6th century ceramics, including amphorae, *dergi* (cooking vessels), pithoi and ceramic building material. A trench at the top of the hill revealed an hydraulic mortar floor with a finely ground ceramic pozzolan, contained within further substantial stone walls. To the west of this building, an adult male skeleton was revealed. He had been buried in a supine position, with the head to the west and the arms crossed across his abdomen. Within the adjacent building areas of tiled surface survived, as did four fragments of rectangular column bases. When a small hole opened in the floor of this building, it was possible to observe elements of a vaulted space underneath. It is certainly conceivable that, rather than representing a tower within the fortress as was first thought, this building had a religious function. Continued excavations will seek to better understand this building, and further work will take place to determine the precise layout of the external fortifications. It is clear that the remains at Khuntsi represent an early Byzantine period fortified site, and it seems likely that it is only a matter of time before their association with Onoguris can be confirmed.

Conclusion

The size, complexity and longevity of Nokakalevi mean that even near-continuous excavations from 1973 to the present day have only scratched the surface of its story. However, the data that is available indicates that human exploitation of the site began in the Bronze Age with limited activity but, as yet, no evidence for actual settlement in this period. Significant activity appears in the 8th/ 7th centuries BC, with concerted ritual practices visible in the archaeological record. This included, most notably, the deliberate breaking and deposition of double-headed

zoomorphic figurines at the edge of the habitable area where it bordered a waterlogged, possibly marshy, space on the eastern lower terrace. However, to date no structures have been identified from this period and it is possible that this evidence will be found further up the slope. From the 6th century BC, possibly reflecting more favourable climatic conditions that also saw the flourishing of the Kingdom of Colchis, there is ample evidence of settlement on Nokalakevi's lower terrace, and this continues through the Hellenistic period. There is sparse evidence of activity at the site in the first three centuries AD, before it became an important regional centre in the 4th century. For the following three centuries it was a key military fortification of the Kingdom of Lazika, with the final phase of walls and towers being constructed to accommodate a combined Laz and Byzantine garrison in the 6th century AD. At the same time, 18km east along the northern edge of the Colchian Plain – an area sometimes referred to in chronicles as the Plain of Archaeopolis – a smaller fortress seemingly formed an important strategic component of a complex network of defensive military structures. It remains to be proven that the walls crowning the hill north of the modern village of Khuntsi represent the ruins of the fortress of Onoguris, however it does seem likely at this stage and the excavations that are continuing there represent an expansion of the work to understand Nokalakevi in its wider landscape.

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FIGURE CAPTIONS:

Figure 1: The site of Archaeopolis, and probable site of Onoguris: Nokalakevi and Khuntsi respectively

Figure 2: Plan of Nokalakevi derived from the 2009 survey

Figure 3: A restored example of one of the zoomorphic figurines found n Nokalakevi

Figure 4: Drone photos of Nokalakevi (© National Agency for Cultural Heritage Preservation of Georgia)

Figure 5: Sketch of the Forty Martyrs' Church, by Dubois de Montpéreux. Reproduced in Serena 2015

Figure 6: The hoard of Byzantine coins discovered by Schneider's expedition

Figure 7: Drone photo of Khuntsi (© National Agency for Cultural Heritage Preservation of Georgia)

Figure 8: The elaborate amphora stamp, when first discovered in 2015

Figure 9: [caption on image]

Figure 10: Location of trenches at Khuntsi

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Figure 11: A section of substantial fortification on the northern edge of the crown of the hill